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PIGEON SOLO

By

Thomas Russell Lavery II

THESIS

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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

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ABSTRACT

PIGEON SOLO

By

Thomas Russell Lavery II

This is a collection of poems dealing with childhood, the economic decline of a city, love and oftentimes confusion. The poet sustains a metaphoric dialogue throughout the collection with an obscure delivery fashion and the use of extended metaphor. The resulting body of work serves as a talisman to a confusing childhood, a history of tense relationships and the conflict inherent in a city with severe economic problems.

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INTRODUCTION

The MLA Style Manual was used to construct this thesis. From a mixed breed Chicano-Caucasoid born and raised in Saginaw, Michigan, one might expect an even balance of Mexican influence and White suburban attitudes; to the contrary, what emanated from my pen is more likely to resemble the conflict inherent in a child of mixed cultures, religions, and attitudes of esteem. From time to time, the poems may seem to take a turn for the worse via perspective shift. What is left is a voice struggling to make sense with itself. At times, the voice makes contradictions in order to clearly present the confusion.

“Brush-Fire War” travels from war-torn Georgia to a peach grove in the American South. “Beans” examines a rusty old city in the voice of the child growing up there. “Poem for Her” invokes the cornfields of childhood love. At times, poems like “Stepping Up” and “Coming to Terms” try to make sense of a transient landscape of consciousness through metaphor. Most often, the poems return to their origin of urban setting.

In these poems, I make concessions with my memories; and allow the compromises to appear as beacons of wonder, regret, shame and praise. Rather than summarize the contents of this volume, I would like to assume that my poetry works for itself in sustaining a dialogue between experience and form. I have strayed from conventional metrics in attempt to achieve a more speech-like method of delivery; to let the experience override the form. Most importantly in this collection, one will find manifold expressions from deep within the confusion of a poet struggling against the weight of his own words; a pigeon, soloing from a rooftop, to a city of birds.

PART ONE

I have been hard on other poets I say while grinding
the head from a crappie with a dull knife.
What animal is not defined by its movement

if a horse is not defined by its stillness?
My friend is blind, but I can also not see him.
He reminds me that I am only a shape in front

of this frying pan. At the start though, we dance
around love like Arawak toddlers around
a blackberry bush; like vultures blackening

down from the heavens, turtles laying out to sea,
reflections on the curve of your wine glass,
donkeys who climb an unfamiliar hill because

their hooves foretell some blue wave. I could not
tell you that my heart is full of Romans and
Gauls, silver and iron. Beautiful shouting

and the red river and the poets
and painters seeing over all of it
with some precision.

Miracle

I see myself as the man standing in his living room,
empty-palmed, aiming with a Mosin-Nagant

at the painting on the mantelpiece. He pictures
a deer in the meadow, a Nazi in the brush, because

this is all he knows. He is a victim of sunrise, of sunset;
He knows that vagrants clean up after themselves

and that a broken watch is better. He is the last
in a line of clowns, unfit for the city;

pawning everything he owns to record albums
no one will hear. He has made the choice;

he will now smile at each passing tree
and cherish the leavings of the city's lapdogs.

The man, holding his gun to a landscape,
is alone in a room

with the richest of fears: to die
in a room with nothing else.

Brush-Fire War

They couldn't take the girls away from their
mother; the house a flaming pile behind them.

In 1862 two old men who acted like oak trees
built the town. It burns from the river

to the last potato field in the north.
People are rising up like dandelion seeds

from the ash. I am a thousand miles away,
In an orange grove listening to the leaves

tell me the names of the dead. Back in Tbilisi
a man eats his tie, the world believes the lies he tells.

Here in the citrus, I am half clown
and half soldier. A woman with lines on her face

touches my shoulder and says,
"Let me show you what it's like to be a horse."

By the People

I smoke my last goodbye before the fall
of tradition, into the crimson state

of cop-stick, chain and fence. The mortal pens
where young and old are a knot, all bound up.

We haven't said a phrase about blue skies
in years. We don't remember how we spoke.

Out the window, the smell of burning shoes,
a blind man mistakes for roasted figs.

History of Penitence

There are mountains in here, dying to blow their tops.
A galleon crashes in my pineal gland every three minutes, but for what it's worth

I can relive all the moments of sanctity, of solitude, of pecking the ground
outside of churches for bits of salvation. We were never one in a basket

or fish for a meal; all that we have ever been is in the cupped hands of
this Saginaw bum, fluent in the language of pigeons.

Look at him hunched there. I am sure the world is spinning around him
or I have forgotten all my mother has taught me.

To lose a fight in this city is all one can get. To die somewhere else
is the last of our fears. For all we know, the city choir is no longer singing

and the conductor is now a falcon, flying from treetop to treetop,
seeing over all the chambers of his memory; rattling out the bells

his mother gave him, tying the shoes of children,
drying saline from the faces of lifeless planets.

After the Wash

Triumph came in the form of the ghost of the man we'd last shot,
grasping a poplar root, spitting his life up, begging for the head shot.
I can paint no road red and detonated for you. It has to be a declaration
of independency wrought by crows, streams, stony riverbeds. Remember
when the lime of dawn comes about your tent; remember those of us
who counted the rivers between our town. Remember the birch stand
and the myths we made beneath it. We are all one in a barrel now,
a distillation of our first breaths and our last saline drops.

Stepping Up

The doctor says if I keep drinking my liver will fall out.
A plum in a wheat-field. I thank him for this.

The next time my mother calls I will explain that
leatherback turtles swim thousands of miles to lay their eggs.

Chief among the things I miss are: a pair of shoes
I bought in Paris, a small framed picture of an owl,

a wristwatch whose hands turn backwards.
These are all in a box.

I have kept a log with the smell of each of my
lover's necks and given them names like windy and Gloria.

All I have learned about being in love is that a man
who stands with his hands in his pockets is not.

I believe that the doctor meets me in a room
removed from his office because the pain

of words dries and crackles over time.
Every week the city takes my refuse from the curb

in an attempt to relieve me of it, but every week
I am left alone in the cleanliness of my kitchen.

The doctor has finished and left the room. An angel
has left with him. A white horizon burns above me.

House Resolution

My fellow moths, I come before you to revise
and extend my remarks. There is no light.

There is only darkness, wide and swollen
across the Earth. Shiny tokens have become paperweights.

We have forgotten who we are fighting against.
The ants have risen in protest. The bees joined.

As many of you know, the trees we once made
our nests in have vanished. Their roots gone too.

We are doing our best to remember the houses
that have lights on.

PART TWO

Each second ticks like a ripened peach.
Dipping my cup into the backyard stream.

The image of my mother so delicately strung before me,
hanging clothes on the line.

Here, this field;
the lip of some wound.

Sisters

The summer is ending too soon
and your lips and bones show it
with the dryness of their fatigue.
The Tigers prance around the park
through the sheen of the TV.
The last sap is rising in the maples outside.
This year has left another line on your neck,
the children of this street have grown tired
of playing in the evening sun, red and moist.
Soon your last sisters will be gone and you
will be left to a kitchen where the shapes of
their bodies linger in the silence, rolling tortillas flat,
cutting mangos, being familiar again.

Watching Grandmother Die

I don't have to tell you the economy is bad.
I can work my way through that.
Let me tell you, I would have jumped from
the great rusty ore docks, by now
but my mother is already screaming for it.

I walked here in the rain to tell you
how much I do not miss the street
I grew up on, or the willow in the yard.
I walked here in the rain to tell you
that I returned the bottles we'd saved in the kitchen.

On the way here, I saw a girl get run over.
Her arms and hair mingled with the back axle.
The driver got out, and walked away from his life.

Farmer's Wife

You are maple stands
deaf and lovely.

our air is sweet
with the chorizo

of this city's
dark kitchen.

You recall our night above the corn
where we kissed like golden perch,

where we nested
in the shallows.

Morning's crown rose above us

in a blue shawl
and we danced

into the corn
without touching.

The Uncles

Soon, they are just men in a room
struggling against the weight
of the shadows cast against them
by lamps in the room. At first
they tumble through a series
of realities: worming a nephew's
hook, explaining the rules of the diamond
to a blind friend, separating two sick hogs
from the rest. At a given point one of them
scratches his scalp, outside, an El Camino passes.

It isn't a matter of regret anymore. What's left
is a chair to sit in, a place to set a beer,
a collective degree of solitude buzzing quietly
enough to wake houseplants from their slumber;
it is now a matter of finding a place to sit down
and be confused. These men, who once had children
to give advice are now obsolete in an age
of computers and blackberries. They stand
as rusty statues in a town square
long absent of pigeons.

For now, all these men have is their making of lists,
sitting in chairs, parsing through a history of patient women,
cupping beers, holding everything back.

I Have Seen You

We all go in together like shades of grey
to set you afloat. This time you sail through
oak stands, clouds of flame, images of your children
spinning in the trees like brilliant mobiles.
We have come as witnesses to the moment of your condensation
on each blade of grass like a thousand brisk points of light dancing
through the dark smoke of memory. We are breathing together
and we are one breath.

The Leaver

I am a volcano, but I love you still.
It cannot be both. I cannot be hooked

into the machine just to watch you
die. And I know you'll do it laughing.

The nurses will rest a broom in your hand
when they see your eyes get big and the

green line goes beep, beep, beep.
That will be your sword, a broom.

You leave town yet you require me
at your going away party.

I am no scarecrow for the shadow
in your cornfield. I'm not a migrant

hoeing your crop. I am the one who
helped you crash your galleon into

wooden cities. I am the pigeon you once
took advice from.

Poem to the Women You Have Been

I like the way I leave, the things I leave,
the way my friends are eagles, the language

I knew before I met you. I can keep up
the chatter of birds while you are gone.

Many of the people in us would agree that
great fires would burn when we least expected.

I am not one of the pigeons in your clan,
not a spot for your shoe, the pin for your club.

Putting this in a sonnet would have been wrong,
you are closer to me than that. We have scraped

the ice of heaven's basement and come home
and thought better of ourselves for it.

Here is something I have always known;
I'm an owl, hooting in your wood.

Your Face

I told you everything while you were sleeping:
how I cheated on you with a flock of sparrows
the morning we met; how I prayed for you
to become an oak leaf when you were sick.
I began the story of how your voice carried
me across the Atlantic but you turned
and made a noise. I told you that in our past
lives I played the viol and you sang to maples
with the pertinence of an owl. My eyes shut
and we shared a long breath into sunrise.

Poem For Her

This is the bird that breaks
the dark silence of late evening,
wondering what all the others are doing asleep.

It is his city that reminds me of the
moments we were not speaking. Lying
in the yard, struggling to imagine something
more crystalline than us; two owls
feeding each other with light.

Poem for Tessa Bonner

We were married once in the wake
of one of your high C's, but you never knew it.
I roped cattle and sheared sheep in a pasture of mud
where your caricature of Byrd's "Fair Britain Isle"
once painted me into a void. I have lived
in the crystalline of your voice for a minute, at least.

And now I am left looking into bottle
where I imagine your galleon burning, breathing,
singing the life back into old dead seas.

PART THREE

Dear mother, I nearly ran to see you but there are great lakes between us. What does it mean to ask if everything has already been given? The Michigan field of my memory is wet with 1985 moonlight. My closest friend has been killed and born again on the back of a swan's wing. He now writes with the fingers of an oak tree.

Perdut

I am not a pigeon anymore, thank God.
I've been spared this time. I get to rest
on low fog like one of James Galway's high notes.
Not like a horse skimming the pale whiff of a rye patch,
but like the memory of looking up at your mother,
nothing written but her face and brown hair.

I'm good at loving you because I don't so much.
It's like a Viking ship that crossed the Atlantic
or a Roman coin at Cahokia, or Lucy and her brown bones.

I am a pigeon now, or the man's body.
A light for this hole, a man who stands
in the places his fathers' pictures were taken.

Shooting Rabbits

It is white now, in our city
and every molecule of me will change
for it. It is like the rabbits who chase
each other around my house, desert when
the snow falls, and return to my lawn
in spring to be made whole again.

I raise the barrel to a floppy ear,
blow a dandelion seed from the sight
and send the hare into places warm
and unfamiliar. I use a bottle of schnapps
as a priest. A marsh hawk uses a maple
to watch us; the human, the hare,
and the birdshot that binds us.

Beans

Nothing happens in our city.
The sun hangs loose like a light-bulb.
Our mother says there is nothing left
to praise here except the sidewalks
and the broken neon-signs.

Mr. Bill says the city is a giant
who can't walk because his shoulders are too heavy.

Mr. Paul says the mayor hates himself
and that he digs holes in his front yard
for moonlight to fill, or people to see.

Brother and I ride our bikes around the city
and name the trees with rust on them.

We think the city is a rusty boat full of birds and trees.
The leaves blowing on the street are like old hats
full of smoke and memory.

Our city is where the cars come to die;
where a choir of birds sings them to sleep.

The Ghost Leaves

There is not a slight of hand, a raised eyebrow, or any method of speech for the way she tells him to leave the city and never come back. To take his car past the apple trees and metal dumps, that there's nothing left in her vocabulary for him, that the language they once had is foreign and unnerving. She paces the wood floor of the kitchen, nervous pigeons line the cement outside. There is not a moment that doesn't pass before him, sitting there, the last time in his chair; driving a meat truck across the Great Plains, skimming the backyard pool for bugs, watching his in-laws stand around a sliced watermelon wondering where else he could be: listening to the radio in the garage on Sunday mornings, not knowing anyone in the house he lives in. There is no sense of defiance in him, now he takes her voice like the orders of military command. *There's a place for everything*, he tells himself knowing that the opposite is also true. The pigeons outside have begun making a wake around the front steps, leading to the front door, as if an invisible red carpet has been laid down for the exiting actor.

Poem to Peter Fritz

Here, I know your teeth! We were soldiers, back then.
It's a gamut we run, now. Give thanks and all you can do.

There are blank pages between us, like swimming trout
and the sobs of our mothers, distant and together from us.

That one time, when we ran across the country
was a cloud! Holy shit man. This is a god damned life.

I never thought I would cross the streams I crossed
in this white island, but all the gulls swooped for me.

In the end, we'll get the place where the gulls rest,
where the Numenoreans' ghosts ride like grey whiffs.

Room to Drink

No, Leave me room to crack peanut-shells
and room to write. Room to remember how
little room we all have. Room for December,

for Labor Day, for every Tuesday. Room
with a big window to hear the plums smack
the ground and the roofers cackle in the morning.

Room to eat watermelons in and decide never to leave.
A room to sacrifice all our breaths in; a room to remember
that a room is only a room, but a moon rises.